

1. THIS IS NOT HEAVEN

I

THE WATERMAN was now only a shadow. At last he had gone behind the moonlight. He had passed through a veil of transparent steel. Out of the smoky grey of the waters he rose, lying outlined through the shining wall of the moon. This deaf one-dimensional nonentity it would not be possible to recall.

They were lonely specks; the blank-gated prodigious city was isolated by its riverine moat, and they had cast themselves away, and were committed to effect an entrance or to die. It was darkening rapidly. This was welcomed by Pullman: let the night come quickly and swallow them up and blot them out. These stairs, which must be twenty feet wide, were of the whitest marble; there was not enough shadow for a mouse to take cover upon this starlit expanse where he and Satters stuck up like a couple of misplaced scarecrows upon a field of virgin corn.

From the camp this had not looked so starkly exposed a place as it was. The fag-master, the master-spirit, had not foreseen that they would be two unhideable figures: it was difficult to discern any details from the other side of the water, but his plan was they should wait, in such concealing shadows as could be found, the arrival of the Bailiff and his cortège, slipping in at the end of the procession. But the Bailiff was behind time.

The coming of night would do very little good, it became obvious, because of the light of the stars. As night fell they became conscious of the dark pit of the lightyears exposed in front of them. They were awed and frightened as they shivered upon the giant stairs, rising to the Gates of the Magnetic City. The stars were larger and colder than on earth, the sky was a chillier and emptier depth. Pullman was terrified by these enormous glaring worlds and constellations, three times the size they were in the earthly night. In another respect they differed markedly. Instead of an attractive glitter, or, if they were small, a pretty twinkle, here they had this deadly glare. It was bluish, lending to Satters a corpselike pallor. Pullman

thought of his own less robust complexion with consternation. It must look frightful. It could even have a demoralizing effect upon his squire, who might interpret it as the pallor of fear.

There was something even more disturbing than their conspicuousness, and the inhospitable grandeur of the heavens; something which progressively claimed more and more their exclusive attention. The walls, it seemed, emitted a magnetic influence of some sort, which Pullman found it difficult to define, and which, it slowly dawned on them, held possibilities of a superlatively unpleasant kind.

The colossal mushroom-coloured walls, rising out of the water to almost a thousand feet, contained some repulsive agent. It was not heat, indeed there was no heat at all in the slight hostile vibration that was communicated. It was like a new impalpable film, or new atmosphere, into which they had unwittingly penetrated. It held them as it repelled them, like an existential element, neither cold nor warm, but subtly terrifying. The appalling attraction of the black chasm of the sky and this new insidious element, belonging to the gigantic walls, competed for a while for the mastery of their shrinking spines: but the nearer of these two influences in the end alone remained. Everything else faded out in the foreground.

Satters pressed himself up against Pullman, the large moist hand of the overgrown fag clutching piteously the arm of the elder, the arm of authority. "Pulley," he exploded in a ghastly purr, "I shall *die*, Pulley, if I have to stand here much longer. I'm through, I really am. What is the matter with this place! It's not cold, is it, really? It's something worse than cold. It's horrible. I wish we had never left the camp. I'd give anything to be over there instead of here, the other side of the beastly water, with all the other chaps, in that awful foxhole of ours. Don't you wish you were, Pulley? Pulley! I feel I am a thousand miles away, it is a thousand miles away I believe." He pressed closer, panicking. "I feel just as if I *were* dead this time. I never felt like this before. Oh I do not wish to go through that gate, Pulley! D'you hear? I say, did you hear what I said?" He began to whimper like a frightened dog. He pressed nearer to Pullman, "I would throw myself into that water, if it were not . . . if it were not for . . . if it were not for . . ."

"Exactly," Pullman said, whose feelings were nearer to Sat-

ters' than he would have liked to confess. But what was expected of the prefect successfully banished the sensations unbecoming in a senior. He glanced contemptuously at his quailing companion. "We are probably somewhere between the Pole Star and the Sun," he observed with detachment, not too easily achieved. "My spine feels as though it were going to melt. But I don't expect that it will."

The thought of Pullman melting like a man of wax, and of finding himself thenceforth alone, had so disintegrating an effect upon Satters that he clung desperately to that masterful being at his side. "I don't know what I shall do if your spine . . . sper . . . sper . . . spine . . ."

Pullman shook him off irritably. "Put your mind at rest. You will dissolve before I shall."

Satters' trembling limbs grew steadier, his thoughts began to run in less desperate channels. The sense of indestructibility which Pullman had managed to communicate had the desired effect.

Pullman braced himself, and did his best to remain erect, a model to the wilting Satters. He set his teeth, he clenched his hands. But the atmospheric strangeness which was undermining him, rapidly made it impossible for him to keep up appearances. It was not long before he lowered himself into a sitting position. Satters, he found, had already succumbed: he lay at full length upon one of the huge stairs.

"This is awful," Satters greeted Pullman dully. "I feel like nothing on earth. Do you? I say, where have we got to?"

Pullman said nothing. He sat beside his fag, gazing ahead, his forearms clasped around his knees, his stick at his side. He did not sit for long like this. He too lay down below Satters, feeling colder and colder every minute, but quite unable to get to his feet and stamp about to improve his circulation.

Pullman did not realize he had fallen asleep. His eyes opened, he looked up. To his horrified amazement he found that the Bailiff was gazing down into his face with great geniality.

"Are you able to rise?" the magistrate asked.

It was an immense effort to lift himself up to his feet.

"What is your name?" inquired the Bailiff gently, holding out a hand to steady him.

"Pullman," said he, passing his hand over his face.

"It's very disagreeable out here. You will find it warmer inside," the Bailiff smiled. "I don't know for whose benefit they magnetise these walls I'm sure. Perhaps they have me in mind—I often wonder! However, fall in behind my men, Pullman. See if you can persuade that friend of yours to get to his feet. If he is too weak, I will get somebody to carry him in. You will feel much better, Pullman, as soon as you are inside the Gates." The Bailiff nodded and smiled as he returned to his litter.

Pullman succeeded in getting Satters into a standing position, and like two drunken men they staggered through the Gates. The Gates met again behind them with an impressive noiselessness. They entered a sort of tunnel, extending for a distance of fifty yards. As they were so unsteady in the darkness they were apt to hurtle against those ahead of them, who retaliated with savage blows. The structure beneath which they were passing shook with the heavy vibrations of the massive elevator being operated overhead.

At last they stepped out into the Magnetic City, or, it would be more true to say, rocked and staggered out. Pullman's first reactions were simultaneously physiological and psychical. There was the rushing of blood down his arteries, and a tremendously violent romantic disillusion. The splendours of the imagination crashed! Where was the unearthly spectacle he had expected to see? They found themselves in no fairy scene, such as rises in the "afterworld" section of the cloudy crypts of the imagination. They did not find themselves among the radiant structures of solid gold or beneath the ambrosial foliage of glittering trees of the pipe-dream-world paradise. It was not at all like that. It was indeed the reverse; and as though in additional mockery their bodies jumped and exploded as if a djin had got into them. Underfoot was the slovenly dust of a natural city. Behind them, and above them, the cyclopean battlements rose into the sky. The dimensions of what *enclosed* this place at least were unreal, were enormous. But that was the extent of the departure from the norm. Crawling up those dizzily-mounting walls were iron ladders of the kind used in compliance with the safety requirements, for escape in case of fire. Where they stood, on issuing from the

tunnel, was a herbless level earth, of parade-ground type (groups of uniformed men stood near the structure which was built over the tunnel, ascending, in steeply diminishing perspective, to the summit of the battlements). There were other signs of the presence of the military, and there was a military flatness and emptiness. A hundred yards away were the bare sides of modern city blocks, up which zigzagged iron ladders resembling those affixed to the battlements.

Now there was an interval, while the Bailiff's patchwork militia was paraded for the march through the city. The companies were sorting themselves out; ten trumpets and ten drums took up their position at the head of the column. Next to them came the negro band, and after that the hundred-and-fifty-strong company of so-called Gladiators. In the wake of this massive body of men came the Bailiff in his litter, and, after him, about one hundred and fifty haiduks and nubians, as also the executioner and his assistants. These were followed by a miscellaneous body of various composition. Finally, a carefully picked nilotic troop, daintily garmented and heavily armed. As a most inelegant bedraggled appendage came Pullman and Satters.

The military master-at-arms, who was a glorified sergeant-major, moved, fiery-eyed, from section to section of his armament. Reaching the negro band he searched for a blemish in the gleaming instruments, next checked the sparkling silver buttons: he examined the fingernails on the track of dirt, and saw to it that the whiteness of the teeth took full advantage of the blackness of the face. He treated the fierce gladiators as though they had been cut-purses, concealing something in their massive cuffs or hiding spoils in their holsters. Shouting at them all the time, he flung them about, and screamed at any spot he discovered on their tunics, or the webbing employed for small-arms. As to the haiduks, no Turk who had caught one could have kid-gloved him less.

The uses of the various classes of warriors would be plain to anyone who had seen him at work. The Gladiators were the personal bodyguard, never used for policing the appellants nor in executions. The Bailiff's savagery was less apparent when entrusted to savages.

These four or five hundred armed men were exquisitely

drilled, and, for the rest, spotless. The parade preened itself in outdated military splendour. Each group had a pennon or standard. The Bailiff's personal standard was the most spectacular.

It was borne before his litter, now held in readiness by two leather-aproned bearers. Practically flat, displayed like a tapestry, it was brilliantly coloured, in pale green and dark cinnamon. There were two main features in the design; on the right was the Mundane Egg—this in dazzling white; a Serpent's head, the neck inflated and shaped like a hood, stood darkly beside it upon the green background; all the design, except for the egg and figures, was in dark cinnamon. Then the body of the serpent was rigid, steeply diagonal, and it carried on its back a diminutive E (EL, one of the ten names of God). In almost imperceptible tracery, upon the silver-white of the Mundane Egg, appeared an orphic inscription. On the opposite side were the letters

ΙΧΘΥΣ

meaning fish; "The great Fish" was a manner of referring to Jesus Christ. And these letters were enclosed in an oval, pointed at one end, representing a fish, a small circle for the eye standing not far from the pointed extremity. This symbolic consociation duplicated the forms of the ovoid fish and the cosmogonic Egg. Lastly the number 666 was found near the summit of the banner, between the two groups of symbols.

Strolling forward, mainly to stretch his legs, Pullman's attention was attracted by the banner. The Serpent's head in conjunction with the Egg presented no difficulty, but the significance of 666, though it had a familiar sound, baffled him. He paused a moment, his eyes fixed upon the mysterious number, when he became conscious of someone behind the curtains of the litter. Not without some slight misgiving he realized that the Bailiff was within, the curtains drawn. The magistrate exposed his square-nosed smile, as he thrust a hooked finger of informal summons through the opening of the curtains. Pullman approached, his face unmoved. He said, "I did not see you, sir!"

"Do you like my pretty banner?" The Bailiff's voice was insinuatingly dulcet.

"Very much, sir. It is a beautiful banner. Could you tell me

the significance of the number 666? Or is that impertinently inquisitive?"

"Noo . . . o . . . Oh!" sang the magistrate archly. "I have a note of that somewhere. Come and see me at my residence. Let me write down your name—how could I have forgotten it!"

"James Pullman." Pullman's name was written down, and just then an imperious blast was sounded. Pullman bowed and went back to the position allotted him.

"You left me here!" Satters grumbled, with the face of someone with a toothache which stopped him from feeling anything else as much as otherwise he would.

An even louder blast of the trumpet sounded. The parade already faced at right angles, pointing in the direction of its march: so there were no words of command, except what the master-at-arms now bellowed. "Parade—Parade! "Shun. Quick . . . March!" Stamping like the Foot-guards do, the parade got in motion.

Trumpets and drums furiously blown and beaten, the Bailiff aloft in his litter, the negro bandmen poising the mouths of enormous silver instruments above their heads, and behind these tallboys a succession of tubes of blazing silver, each watched over by a shining ebony face—all the barbaric bombast of the Bailiff's parade headed up a cheerless, twentieth-century side-street, stupefied by the customary torpor of that hour of the day.

The Bailiff with his square nose and his apple for a chin, the trumpeters, all the strutters and swaggerers, passed the carpet-slippers of a seated man, exposed to the evening street, relaxed within a doorway, the white smoke of his pipe curling around the bold white cliffs of his hair; passed a black cat seated upon a window-sill, its eyes fixed in a green trance, the membranes of its ears only recording cat-sounds, and in any case not functioning just then; passed a pressing-and-cleaning outfit, the last pair of trousers of the day going into the steaming press. So the white tobacco-smoke continued to curl against the snowy hair, and the old man's smoky eyes saw nothing, the cat continued immobile and unresponsive as a monument, and the steam issuing from the ultimate pair of trousers put a veil over the window, the other side of which passed the glittering procession.